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ABSTRACT

It is now widely recognized, after the publication of four reports on the subject, that public education in the United States is in a state of crisis. This policy paper contends, however, that much of the debate on these reports has been based on distortions of their contents and challenges the current Administration's position which holds that public education has been harmed by increasing Federal aid and court decisions in the area of equal opportunity. It is emphasized that the goals of equal education and educational excellence are inseparable. Excellence entails developing the talents of all to the fullest, and this is said to be impossible in the face of discrimination. Excellence is also impossible without adequate funding, and in this regard a larger Federal role (rather than a reduced one) is called for. Other areas in which Federal involvement is held to be essential include testing (to ensure validity) and curriculum (to ensure that all public school students, particularly blacks, have the opportunity to develop competencies leading to success in school, the job market, and the community). (CMG)

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# THE NAACP PRELIMINARY REPORT ON PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION: AN UPDATE OF THE 1977 NAACP REPORT ON QUALITY EDUCATION FOR BLACK AMERICANS: AN IMPERATIVE

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

186 REMSEN STREET • BROOKLYN HEIGHTS, NEW YORK 11201 • TEL. (212) 858-0800

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# THE NAACP PRELIMINARY REPORT ON PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION: AN UPDATE OF THE 1977 NAACP REPORT ON QUALITY EDUCATION FOR BLACK AMERICANS: AN IMPERATIVE

Nineteen of the nation's top educators, including three active school superintendents, met in a closed, two-day session at the NAACP's 74th Annual Convention. They analyzed four recent reports on the crisis in public education, as well as the Reagan Administration's initiatives in this area.

These educators reported that the crisis in American education has suddenly been catapulted into the limelight by the reports of the national commissions as well as the 1984 presidential candidates.

In 1977, the NAACP convened a conference in Chicago, Illinois to discuss the deteriorating quality of education received by Black youth. The report that resulted from the conference stated: "Our national crisis is that the educational system in this rich country is failing to educate our nation's children."

Because the report was perceived as referring primarily to minority youth, our words went unpublished and unheeded. Unfortunately, the report is as accurate and valid today as it was then. This causes us to reaffirm our concerns at this propitious time.

Education for all of our children remains a primary goal for our society. Education remains the great equalizer for most Americans; it is the bridge to opportunity for decent jobs, for decent living conditions, to achieve and maintain our democratic traditions.

Paradoxically, at a time of economic and social need, our public educational systems have come under assault from high levels of our government.

## *THE PRESIDENT'S ROLE*

The more the school issue is debated, the more the public is misled and miseducated. Led by the President, the debate has resulted from reports whose contents have been unfairly distorted and/or ignored:

- The government is told that its role is one of "protecting constitutional and civil rights." However, the President unfairly speaks of harm to educational quality as a result of federal legislation and actions to protect minorities and other special groups in need.

- The government is told that it should "help meet the needs of key groups of students." However, the President unfairly contends that the schools are worse as a result of increased federal aid and court decisions.

- The National Commission on Excellence recommends that salaries for teachers should be increased, their work-year lengthened, their evaluations improved, and their university preparation strengthened. However, the President unfairly reduces all recommendations to a simplistic call for merit pay that divides teachers and offers no concrete promise that improved instruction will result.

- The government is told that "the twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning" and cannot be divided "in principle or in practice." However, the President unfairly leads a debate that pits "excellence" against equity as if they were mutually exclusive.

- The government is told that there is a federal role in education. However, the President urges the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education.

- No report suggests that prayer in the public schools would improve their programs. However, the President places prayer in the schools high on his list of priorities for school improvement.

- The Task Force on Education for Economic Growth chaired by Governor Hunt advised increased investment in the schools so as to enhance their effectiveness. However, the President unfairly leads the effort to cut federal funds for schools and to subsidize private education through tuition tax credits and vouchers.

- The government is advised to "avoid the unproductive tendency of some to search for scapegoats among the victims, such as the beleaguered teachers." However, the President unfairly leads the assault on teachers.

- The government is told that it has "the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education." However, the President offers no suggestions, except to get the Federal Government out of the schools.

*TRADITIONAL FEDERAL ROLE*

The President's statements notwithstanding, the NAACP insists that the Federal Government has the responsibility and obligation not only to identify and define the national interest in education, but also to guarantee equal opportunity in education, and to encourage and support educational programs which promote economic prosperity, the national defense, and the maintenance and strengthening of our democratic institutions.

Consistent with this obligation, the Federal Government in the last twenty years has:

— Taken the lead in implementing the Supreme Court's decree to desegregate the schools of the nation.

— Provided resources which have enabled economically distressed school districts to make substantial strides in the direction of improving the quality of their educational offerings.

- Opened up educational opportunities for handicapped persons.

- Helped to remove the barriers confronted by language minority students.

- Insisted on the development and implementation of affirmative action plans within our school systems.

Now we are confronted with a political attack by the President of the United States not only on the positive steps taken by the Federal Government, but on our entire public school system — an attack which,

- is in direct conflict with what the nation, through the Congress and the courts, has recognized as the obligation and responsibility of the Federal Government in education

- threatens to reverse the progress the nation has made in the last twenty years, because of the Federal Government's support of education, and

- is reminiscent of the state-centered Federalism of the post-Reconstruction period.

The President's sweeping and unfounded statements that federally financed programs and Federal court decisions in the area of equal opportunity have led to a deterioration in the quality of education, constitute a disservice to a nation that is struggling to meet the goal of translating the rhetoric of our Constitution into reality.

## THE NAACP THRUST

The NAACP calls on all supporters of the public school system — a system which despite its imperfections has made outstanding contributions to the life of our nation — to join issue with the President and say to him in unmistakable terms: the Federal Government must intensify — not lessen — its program for enforcing the laws designed to provide equal educational opportunities for our people; the Federal Government must increase — not decrease appropriations designed to enable school districts to respond to the needs of what the National Commission on Excellence in Education refers to as the "nation's youth who are most at risk" and describes as "key groups of students, such as gifted and talented, the socio-economically disadvantaged, minority students, and the handicapped." We desperately need leadership that is committed to keeping the Federal Government out in front in what Gunnar Myrdal has described as a "crusade for the soul of America."

## EXCELLENCE AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY — INSEPARABLE EDUCATIONAL GOALS

In the renewed public focus on improvement of the public school systems, it would be a tragedy if the goal of equal educational opportunity was to be made the enemy of the goal of excellence.

In fact, the two goals are inseparable. As the authors of *A Nation at Risk* have said:

> *We do not believe that a commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other, either in principle or in practice . . . our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities.*

## GOALS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The fundamental truth of that observation can be seen, when one examines the objectives of public education. In the view of the NAACP these aims are as follows:

1. To transmit basic skills and knowledge which will help students reach their full potential and contribute to society.

2. To provide channels and opportunities which will enable students to put the skills they have acquired to productive and effective use.

3. To provide the basis for good citizenship, by enabling students to function cooperatively in a diverse and pluralistic society.

4. To go beyond the development of competitive skills in order to enable the students to be feeling as well as thinking people, who will become caring and cooperative members of society.

While the goals have long been generally accepted in theory, and in our Constitution and laws, it is no secret that practices of discrimination and deprivation have prevented public schools from fulfilling these aims for large segments of society. Black people and members of other racial minorities have been deliberately separated and racially classified in the public schools and systematically deprived of the resources needed to succeed. Women have been educated only to assume severely limited roles in our society. Disabled people have been excluded from public schools entirely or placed in custodial programs rather than those which will enable them to develop their skills. Students whose native tongue is a language other than English have not been given the opportunity for meaningful participation in schools. Their language has been treated as a disability rather than an asset.

In addition, discrimination in the economic sector has denied all of these groups the ordinary rewards that attend educational achievement and thus has limited their incentives to succeed.

For whites as well as minorities, racial and economic isolation in the public schools has had detrimental effects. It has impaired their development and denied them the ability to function effectively in a multi-racial society.

Only since the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and more particularly in the past fifteen, years has government recognized the existence of these barriers and begun the work of removing them. Real progress has been made. The indications are manifold.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported in 1980, that the greatest gains on achievement tests over the past decade had been made by Black children in the Southeast public schools. In addition, students *have* succeeded, as evidenced by the major increase in college enrollment for minority students and their entrance into professional endeavors.

These gains are clearly attributable to school desegregation and the Federal programs providing assistance to low-income students. In light of this evidence, it is outrageous for President Reagan to suggest that efforts in the courts and elsewhere to secure equal educational opportuntity are responsible for a deterioration of quality. It is equally outrageous for his Administration to seek to eliminate the remedies and to dismantle the civil rights machinery that have brought the limited progress we have achieved thus far.

Certainly there are costs to remedying years of neglect and deprivation, for example, securing the entry into schools of more than three million handicapped students previously denied a public education. But the costs are essential to achieving the goals of excellence and equality.

Another President, Thomas Jefferson, said that the goal of public education was to "uncover the mass of talents that lie buried beneath poverty for want of means of development" and thereby to double or triple the economic capacity of a young nation. The recent reports suggest that this nation will achieve a rebirth of its economic capacity only by improvements in public education which will secure increasing numbers of capable and productive citizens. That goal of excellence can only be achieved, if we continue and intensify the struggle for equality of opportunity for all our young people.

## FINANCING PUBLIC EDUCATION

The President's policies are clearly antithetical to his professed goals in education. Consistently, for the three budget years that he has been in office, he has recommended less money for education than the Congress has appropriated.

The Report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Education, clearly establishes the Federal responsibility to assure the adequate financing of education:

"The Federal Government has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest."

The report, *Making the Grade*, by the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Elementary and Secondary Education Policy, specifically recommended continuing Federal efforts to provide special educational programs for the poor and for the handicapped and that categorical programs required by the Federal Government be paid for from the Federal Treasury.

This concept of the Federal role is not new. Historically, the Federal Government has had a powerful impact on education through grants-in-aid, both formula and discretionary.

Whenever the national interest has been at risk, the Federal Government has responded through the enactment of educational legislation to address and remedy the issues.

Examples of such legislation are:

1862 — *Land Grant College Act* — Mandated that the states set aside land for agriculture and mechanical engineering.

1917 — *Smith Hughes Act* — Funded vocational education the training of workers for the nation's factories.

1958 — *National Defense Education Act* Enacted in direct response to Russia's launching of Sputnik in 1957.

1964 — *Great Society Legislation* — When our nation was threatened with serious civil disruption and civil social inequality, a series of important pieces of legislation were enacted: Economic Opportunity Act, 1964; Civil Rights Act, 1964; and Secondary Education Act, 1965 (with Title I as its centerpiece, and the basis for P.L. 94-142 - Education For All Handicapped Children Act).

1968 — *Bilingual Education Act.*

1975 — *Women's Educational Equity Act.*

In higher education, the Federal Government has sponsored a panoply of student assistance programs, providing access for the poor and minorities and expanding opportunities for the middle class. The developing institutions program (Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965) has provided resources for minority oriented colleges and for other institutions that served large concentrations of low-income students.

Now, in 1983, as our nation is on the brink of losing its dominance as the leading world power, and as other nations, recognizing the importance of education and the demands of technology are increasing their expenditures on education, it is absolutely imperative that the United States of America reestablish its educational priorities.

We think it is short-sighted and unreasonable to assume, that this nation can focus on educational excellence without a commitment to adequate funding. In this regard, the Federal Government has a central and vital role.

Hence, we urge the President to take leadership in assuring adequate funding for public education by heeding the admonition of his own commission "Excellence costs. But in the long run mediocrity costs more."

## STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT

> *The great accomplishments of Japanese primary and secondary education lies not in its creation of a brilliant elite, but in its generation of such a high average level of capability. (Action for Excellence, by Task Force on Education for Economic Growth).*

The quality of education in our nation has been compared to that in several other industrial nations of the world. The comparisons have often been unfavorable to us. Such comparisons are based upon *absolute* standards of quality founded upon a national commitment, or lack of it, to a well-articulated set of academic objectives. The average level of academic achievement for a nation must be high on *absolute* standards (criterion referenced assessment) rather than upon relative standards (norm referenced).

When information is needed about the status of academic achievement in the nation, it is usually the practice to refer to standardized test results. In order that appropriate use can be made of such test results, several concerns must be met.

Achievement standards for high school graduation have been articulated by the *College Board's Report, Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and be Able to Do,* and the *Nation at Risk: The Imperative in Educational Reform* report. The NAACP is in favor of the description of the curricula content. Achievement testing must be tied to these standards, or to such standards as can be mutually agreed upon. There can be no valid national test in the absence of a national curriculum.

However, it must be stressed that the *valid* testing of students presupposes that all students have had an equal opportunity for exposure to the curriculm.

*Valid* testing, also, presupposes that students have had equal opportunities for developing test sophistication (coaching).

Most important of all is the need for information from valid testing *disaggregated* to a meaningful level. Specifically, when test scores on valid achievement tests are reported, it is important to know precisely what part of the standard curriculum was offered to which students. This information must be provided specifically by race. Otherwise a true picture of the differential treatment and the differential performance of students cannot be provided. It is because such information has not been provided that the *higher level of risk for Black children, than for the nation as a whole, has been obscured.*

In regard to the assessment of teachers before they are employed, teachers, if evaluated, must be given tests that match the curriculum that they were exposed to in an

accredited institution. A national or state test cannot be valid in the absence of a national or state curriculum. Tests cannot be considered valid unless there is verification that their content is based upon what has actually been taught.

The stongest evidence for measuring employed teacher competence is not their achievement or rating on national examinations. Rather, it is the progress made by their students.

## REGULATION OF THE TESTING INDUSTRY

National and State Standardized Tests are proliferating. The testing industry is largely unregulated. The use of test results—to measure student achievement, to compare the educational achievement of nations, to license teachers, to label students, to compare school districts—is viewed as acceptable and sensible even though the practice itself is inadequately evaluated.

Testing, which should serve to improve the schools, now threatens to dominate them. For Black and other minority students, testing becomes the potential, and in some cases, the actual new tool of invidious discrimination—the device to separate, retard and block student progress. The testing landscape is filled with potential victims—students and teachers, Blacks and other minorities, students with ability who test poorly, slow learners, wrongly labeled students and thousands of others who become caught, for one reason or another, in the web of the abusive use of tests. Because of these abuses and potential abuses of standardized testing, *regulation must be considered for the public good.*

## *CURRICULUM*

The 1977 *NAACP Report on Quality Education for Black Americans: An Imperative,* identified four specific skill areas which promote the experiences necessary to prepare for individual achievement and success. The four skill areas are: 1) communications and computational skills, 2) marketable and practical skills, 3) environomental and cultural skills; and, 4) skills for self study.

Consistent with the NAACP position taken in 1977, we endorse the "New Basics" contained in the report of the National Commission for Excellence in Education (NCEE), namely:

A. 4 years of English
B. 3 years of Mathematics
C. 3 years of Science
D. 3 years of Social Studies; and
E. 1½ years of Computer Science

However, the implementation of such a curriculum at the maximum operational level cannot be left to chance. Financial and human resources must be put into place to assure every public school student, Black students in particular, those opportunities which develop competencies that lead to better academic accomplishments, job market success, and improvement of life for one's self and his community.

In addition we are advocating:

A. That computer literacy be introduced at the kindergarten level and enhanced as the student progresses to the higher levels; and that it be made accessible to all students.

B. That test-taking skills, including coaching, be built into each academic discipline.

C. Career education be adapted to the changing demands of a technological society.

D. That school districts establish procedures that guard against unfair placement of minority students in special education classes especially for the emotionally handicapped.

E. That every child needs to receive a multicultural education, in order to learn respect and appreciation for the cultures and heritage of the groups that have made our society great.

Based on effective school research, we also know that in order for a curriculum to be successful, the teachers that implement it should possess the following qualities and characteristics:

1. Unconditional respect for the dignity and integrity of the student.

2. Belief that the student is educable.

3. Enthusiasm for knowledge, and

4. Competence in the subject matter being taught.

## CONCLUSION

Public education is unquestionably a cornerstone for the full participation of all citizens in the social, political, and economic life of our country. The importance of our commitment to public education was identified by President Carter's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties:

*The current crisis of confidence in public schooling is more widespread, persistent, and intense than ever before. This is precisely the time to reaffirm the legacy and potential of public education. A commitment to excellence in public education for children of all abilities is fundamental to the American ideal of a just society.*

There is a crisis in American education; it is a crisis of opportunity, of access, of equity for children who have traditionally been denied opportunity, access, and equality. We have learned long since that excellence in education cannot be attained if it is provided for only a few; we cannot have quality education, if we continue to condone inequality for any.

Our national interest is to ensure that constitutional mandates of equality are carried out for all in the public schools; the welfare of our public schools is closely tied to the welfare of our future as a nation.

No nation heretofore has sought to provide education for as many children of different backgrounds. This is one of our strengths, but it is also a responsibility. We have forty million of our children in school; approximately half are female, nearly eleven million are members of minority groups with six and a half million Black and over three million Hispanic. A little less than thirty million are white, and three and a half million handicapped.

All of our children, regardless of their individual characteristics, share in one thing; the public schools represent their chance for happiness and success in life. Their future demands real answers, not slogans.

The NAACP remains committed to the twin goals of excellence and equality in public education. Neither can be achieved on a national level without maintaining a strong public educational system; neither can be attained without the other. We call for all Americans to join together to support and improve our public education system; to act constructively to eliminate its deficiencies, to resolve its problems; and to act in unison to ensure that quality education is available for every child.

In the words of Thomas Carlyle: "That there should be one man [to] die ignorant who had the capacity for knowledge, this I call a tragedy."

# NAACP
# EDUCATIONAL SUMMIT
# PARTICIPANTS

Dr. David Blackwell
Statistics Dept.
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720

Dr. Boyd Bosma
Human and Civil Rights
National Education Association
1201 16th St., NW
Washington, DC 20036

Dr. Arthur Flemming
Former Chairman
U.S. Commission on Civil Rights
NEA
1201 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.

Mrs. Carol Gibson
Director of Education
National Urban League, Inc.
600 East 62nd Street
New York, N.Y. 10021

Dr. Willie Herenton
Superintendent
Memphis Schools
2597 Avery
Memphis Tennessee 38112

Dr. Asa Hilliard
Fuller E. Calloway Professor
Urban Education
P.O. Box 243
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303

H. Kenneth Johnston
Director, Chapter I
New Orleans Public Schools
New Orleans, La 70118

Dr. Jerome Jones
Superintendent of Schools
St. Louis
911 Locust Street
St. Louis, MO 63101

Dr. Ruth Love
Superintendent of Schools
Chicago
228 N. LaSalle
Chicago, IL

Dr. Thomas Minter
Dean of Professional Studies
Herbert H. Lehman College
160 Columbia Heights
Apt. 10F
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Dr. Charles Moody
Founder
National Alliance of Black School Educators
School of Education
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Ms. Sharon L. Paul
Teacher
New Orleans Public Schools
1619 Leonidas Street
New Orleans, La. 70116

Ms. Diane M. Payne
Teacher
4850 Frances Dr.
New Orleans, La. 70126

Ms. Thelma D. Perkins
Ciba-Geigy
Ardsley, New York 10502

Continued
List of Participants
Educational Summit

Mrs. Maxine Smith
Memphis Board of Education
Memphis Branch NAACP
1188 Minna Place, Stre. 214
Memphis, TN 38104

Dr. Leonard Stevens
Director
Office of School Monitoring &
Community Relations
1234 Terminal Tower
Cleveland, OH 44113

William Taylor, Esq.
Director
Center for Law & Policy Review
Law School
Catholic University, Room 10
Washington, DC 20064

Dr. Ken Tollett
Director
Institute for the Study of
Educational Policy
Howard University – West Campus
2900 Van Ness Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20008

Ms. Doris Hawkins
Teacher
1888 Alder Branch Lane
Germantown, TN 38138

Convened by Dr. Beverly Cole, Director, Education Department, NAACP, 186 Remsen Street, Brooklyn, New York 11201